

CILT Primary Languages Head Teacher Survey: Report

Introduction

This report presents the findings from an ongoing survey, launched in October 2010 by CILT, the National Centre for Languages to capture the opinions of primary school head teachers in England on language teaching in the primary phase.

The survey builds on research by CILT in September 2010 which sought to examine the extent of provision for primary languages in local authorities and its future sustainability through a survey of Local Authority Advisers for Primary Languages¹. It aims to engage more widely with professionals outside the immediate field of language teaching, specifically focusing on head teachers in primary schools and their views on primary languages policy and practice.

Research questions

1. What key messages about primary languages would primary head teachers wish to communicate to the government?
2. What do primary school head teachers perceive to be the benefits to children of learning primary languages?
3. What support do primary head teachers feel is needed in order to be able to sustain language teaching in their schools?

Key findings

- Primary languages are important – the resounding message from head teachers to the government.
- Language learning plays a unique role in expanding children's aptitudes, attitudes and opportunities – head teachers reported a diverse range of educational and social benefits for young language learners, strengthened by starting in the primary phase.
- Sustaining language teaching in primary schools requires adequate investment, resourcing and recognition – support from funding, a skilled and enthusiastic workforce, a range of networks and the raised status of languages in education is needed for head teachers to maintain, and develop, provision in their schools.

¹ *The Provision of Primary Languages: Report on Questionnaire for Local Authorities Advisers* (CILT, September 2010).
www.primarylanguages.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_and_statistics/languages_research/cilt_projects.aspx

Method

The survey is being conducted online in order to maximise responses from primary head teachers nationally². It comprises a short questionnaire, constructed using a survey-building website, with three open questions:

1. What would be your message to government about primary languages?
2. In your opinion, what are the benefits to children of learning primary languages?
3. What support do you need to sustain languages in your school?

To help ensure the representativeness of the survey result, an additional personal details section requests respondents to confirm their job title and local authority (compulsory) and to provide a name and email address for any follow up questions (optional). All responses are reported anonymously.

Information about the rationale of the survey and a link to the online questionnaire was sent by email to Local Authority Advisers for Primary Languages (LA Advisers) on 1 October 2010 for disseminating to primary head teachers in their areas. This group comprised 241 advisers in 151 local authorities. This method of contacting head teachers through their existing networks with LA Advisers was designed as a measure to maximise participation and to help promote the survey nationally.

This report presents findings from the survey based on questionnaires completed during the period 1 October 2010 – 8 November 2010. These results represent the responses of 114 primary head teachers from 39 English local authorities (approximately a quarter of the 152 local authorities in England). The appendices provide head teachers' responses to the survey in full.

² CILT Primary Languages Head Teacher Survey questionnaire URL www.surveymonkey.com/CILT_headteacher_survey

Findings

What are head teachers key messages to the government about primary languages?

Primary languages are important – the resounding message from head teachers to the government.

91 head teachers emphasised the value of language teaching in the primary phase.

The majority of these head teachers (70) outlined a strong rationale to support their case for the importance of primary languages. Commonly cited arguments included:

- The benefits of language teaching for children and schools:

The MFLs we have established in our school have greatly enhanced the pupil's learning opportunities and widened their intercultural awareness in a way that few other curriculum areas could. The teaching of a MFL has also helped provide an additional vehicle through which to teach other key areas of the KS2 curriculum e.g. literacy and numeracy.

Head teacher, Wirral

The impact of Spanish teaching has been paramount to the school. I feel we are doing our children a disservice if we do not teach them a MFL.

Head teacher, Brighton and Hove

It opens children's learning ability to other, further learning. Having another language is like having an extra soul.

Head teacher, Nottingham

They are vital and enhance understanding about the construction of all languages as well as instilling in children a greater understanding about the importance of communication.

Head teacher, Merton

- The necessity of language learning for living in today's global society:

Although curriculum currently very full, MfL [is] vitally important if we are educating children for their future lives. With technology and transport as such children when adult could be very transient and need to have a range of languages for communication. Children from other countries learn several languages as a matter of course but [the] UK seems to be limiting these opportunities.

Head teacher, Cumbria

A very important skill to learn at an early age, especially in rural areas where there are very few people from different cultures.

Head teacher, Norfolk

We are way behind the rest of Europe (except Ireland) in our language provision generally and the next generation will not be able to take their place in the European

or global community if they are unable to communicate with others.
Head teacher, Kent

- The advantages to the learner of starting language learning at an early age:

It is vital to continue with languages at an early age when children are most receptive and can learn quickly.

Head teacher, Sheffield

Primary schools are best placed to begin language teaching since the children are learning the structure and mechanics of English. These principles underpin the learning of a second language.

Head teacher, Kingston-upon-Hull

Really important, research states that unless you speak a language by 11, you will not be able to speak it like a native.

Head teacher, Solihull

33 head teachers wished to communicate specific messages to government about the curriculum status of languages.

Nearly a fifth of head teachers (22) explicitly called for the government to make languages a statutory subject within the primary curriculum.³ A number of these responses urged for wider reform, making language learning compulsory from primary through to secondary and post-16 education.

After a considerable investment by Government and much hard work by the majority of Primary schools to ensure correct provision it would be devastating to NOT continue the decision to make MFL compulsory in Primary schools.

Head teacher, Suffolk

A lot of energy, commitment and resource have gone in to this area and we are beginning to see the impact on children's learning and staff confidence. To withdraw from this commitment now would waste all of this effort and resources.

Head teacher, Cheshire West and Chester

That they are important and should be preserved within any revision of the curriculum. They also need to be properly resourced and funded.

Head teacher, Sefton

Ensure that teacher training includes MFL. Improve progression from KS2-3. Make MFL compulsory at secondary schools.

Head teacher, Hounslow

³ This figure excludes four head teachers who stated that their key message to government would be to make languages compulsory in secondary and post-16 education but did not explicitly mention making primary languages statutory within their response.

21 head teachers voiced particular messages on designing the curriculum and language teaching pedagogy.

Comments included 'slimming down' the current primary curriculum to release the time and resources necessary for effective language teaching and using interactive, oracy-based approaches to language teaching founded on principles of good primary practice:

Do not make the approach prescriptive. Allow it embrace learning language through learning about culture through food, leisure activities, family life and lifestyles.

Head teacher, West Midlands

We need a slimmed down curriculum in order to allow proper time for languages in the primary curriculum.

Head teacher, Hounslow

Make PMFL [primary modern foreign languages] compulsory, but ensure that the focus is on oracy before literacy.

Head teacher, Kent

In addition, 10 head teachers stressed the important role of teacher expertise in ensuring the effective delivery of primary languages through the creation of a high quality language learning environment.

Make it compulsory [and] continue to fund CPD to train non specialists.

Head teacher, Durham

Primary MFL needs specialist teachers in order that standards and progression are appropriate. Links with secondary schools can go some way to achieving this.

Head teacher, Hounslow

What do head teachers believe are the benefits to children of learning primary languages?

Head teachers saw a unique role for primary languages in expanding children's aptitudes, attitudes and opportunities. There was a strong consensus that primary languages promote children's learning across the curriculum and lay solid foundations for their future success in education and the wider world.

Responses described a wealth of educational and social benefits, strengthened by starting language learning in the primary phase.

Social benefits

61 head teachers reported benefits for children's personal development.

Responses described the important contribution of languages learning to increasing children's confidence and self-esteem. Head teachers valued the opportunities that languages create for children to experience enjoyment in learning and find a sense of pride in their achievements:

New skills, confidence, chance for less able pupils to shine.

Head teacher, Brighton and Hove

It is a life skill. It raises self-esteem, particularly among children with English as an additional language and often those with SEN.

Head teacher, Northamptonshire

To give children the confidence and skills to try something new [and] which is also challenging.

Head teacher, Solihull

59 head teachers reported benefits for participating and prospering in a global society.

Languages were portrayed as a medium through which children can access different cultures and broaden their knowledge and understanding of the world. Head teachers described the pivotal role of language learning in fostering children's intercultural skills and positive attitudes towards diversity. In turn, this was seen to help children develop a deeper respect for their own language and culture as part of belonging to a wider global community.

The younger the better - less racism, more open minds, more marketable employees - global citizens - too many benefits to both the individual and to society!

Head teacher, Nottingham City

Children are interested and curious about languages at this stage in their education. Developing this interest will lead to improved cultural harmony, and lead the way to a happier, more tolerant future for all.

Head teacher, Barnsley

When taught well it can bring a sense of pride in one's own culture and language, bring respect for others and give a sense of achievement and build self esteem.

Head teacher, Kent

Educational and cognitive benefits

58 head teachers reported benefits for enriching children's general language development.

Through the process of language learning, children were seen to develop competence both in the new language and in their core linguistic skills.

Enhanced speaking and listening and knowledge about language were commonly reported outcomes arising from the young language learners' transferable skills:

Children learn to listen carefully and copy sounds so this helps with all their speaking and listening skills helping them to become confident speakers.

Head teacher, Kingston-upon-Hull

It opens doors for children and helps with general language acquisition if it is taught hand in hand with English, as we do in our school. We have been part of two international language studies with the London Metropolitan University and Southampton University for longitudinal studies of language acquisition.

Head teacher, Brighton and Hove

Develops listening skills and develops understanding of language and language patterns.

Head teacher, Wirral

Many responses explicitly mentioned the positive impact on children's literacy in English:

Gaining skills in language learning undoubtedly helps children to better understand the construction of their own language. This leads to a greater appreciation of English grammar, vocabulary, spelling and sentence construction.

Head teacher, Kent

Transference of grammar skills, links to development of English as a 'language' to be learned.

Head teacher, Solihull

Enables linguistic talent to be promoted and shared. Enables ethnic minorities to feel valued citizens. Can contribute to better understanding of English grammar and language structure.

Head teacher, City of Plymouth

Furthermore, 38 head teachers highlighted the role of language learning in helping children to develop a range of fundamental learning skills.

A wide range of cognitive benefits were reported including enhanced thinking and analytical skills, increased concentration, greater memory capacity and improved recall:

Increased concentration and learning.

Head teacher, Hounslow

It opens up new avenues of exploration; it helps children use their brains in a different way.

Head teacher, Wiltshire

Aiding memory and ability to manipulate knowledge.
Head teacher, London Borough of Merton

Facilitates multi-level thinking
Head teacher, Wokingham

Other benefits included promoting children’s enthusiasm for learning and equal opportunities, providing access to an enhanced curriculum and preparing them for successful futures in education and the workplace:

There is a very significant element of language learning at a primary level which promotes enjoyment of learning as they see themselves progressing rapidly with something they can use.
Head teacher, West Kent

It prepares them for high school [and] gives a broad balanced knowledge.
Head teacher, Sutton

It broadens their horizons, extends their linguistic skills, often having a beneficial effect on the standard of English they speak, gives them the skills to broaden their life opportunities by making them more 'attractive' in the workplace of the future.
Head teacher, Sunderland

The most important to my mind are developing confidence when speaking, aiding memory and ability to manipulate knowledge and inclusion, i.e all children given an equal opportunity to learn a language (not just the privileged who can pay for clubs).
Head teacher, London Borough of Merton

A number of head teachers felt that the benefits were simply ‘too many to mention’.

Starting early – capitalising on the benefits

50 head teachers reported that language learning is best started at a young age.

Head teachers strongly believed in the importance of teaching languages to children in the primary phase in order to maximise the potential gains on offer to the learner. Their rationales included:

- Qualities inherent to young learners (e.g. their (neurological) predisposition towards language acquisition, natural sense of curiosity, lack of inhibitions and higher motivation):

It’s very positive and children’s brains are more receptive at this age.
Head teacher, Cumbria

It is a fun way to discover a new language - children are like sponges at primary level and should be given the opportunity to learn.
Head teacher, Hertfordshire

Research shows this enhances development of the language centres in the brain; children are much less inhibited about speaking a new language at this age.
Head teacher, Wokingham

- Features of the primary classroom conducive to language learning (e.g. a safe environment, familiar teachers and interactive pedagogy):

They are much happier to experiment, have a go, and not to mind when they make mistakes. With children being taught by the same teacher for most of the week, primary schools offer the perfect opportunity for the daily consolidation of language, using it in real-life situations.

Head teacher, Kent

Good primary practice is practical, well resourced, driven by speaking and listening skills and creative in its approaches; all of these are equally important for effective language learning.

Head teacher, Cheshire West and Chester

What support do head teachers need to sustain languages in their schools?

Sustaining languages in primary schools requires adequate investment and resourcing.

54 head teachers reported that ongoing funding was needed to enable language teaching in their schools to continue, and flourish. Employing teachers with the skills to deliver primary languages and CPD were frequently mentioned areas in need of investment:

Cash/funding to employ specialist teacher/teaching time.

Head teacher, Plymouth

We need funding for the Primary languages Strategy to be maintained - for staff INSET, for pupils' resources and for curriculum development.

Head teacher, Cheshire West and Chester

Some funding towards supporting the language learning of our non specialist teachers as well as funding to retain the support we have from native MFL speakers.

Head teacher, West Kent

Further, nearly a quarter of heads expressed a need for high quality teaching materials to support good practice pedagogy and effective language learning. Examples of sought-after materials included schemes of work, resources for ICT and those promoting a cross-curricular approach:

Up to date and interactive resources.

Head teacher, Norfolk

We need more resources and ICT to continue to be developed, to teach languages in a way which will really become embedded in youngsters.

Head teacher, Cheshire West and Chester

Support from a skilled, confident and enthusiastic workforce is needed to sustain and further develop quality primary languages teaching.

51 head teachers called for support from the teaching workforce to help deliver primary languages effectively in their schools. There was a particular need for specialist teachers, class teachers with confidence in the language, ASTs, secondary teachers, lead teachers, native speakers and foreign language assistants:

Specialist trained teachers who can help promote languages on two levels - one purely the vocabulary and the other integrating it into other aspects of the school day.

Head teacher, Sefton

Primary schools need to have a M.F.L. co-ordinator who is passionate about primary languages, who is able to motivate and inspire colleagues and who has the necessary expertise to provide in-service to colleagues. All this requires ring fence funding.

Head teacher, Swindon

Support given by ASTs and Lead Teachers. This is vital to maintain the enthusiasm and develop the confidence of the non-specialist staff who teach languages.

Head teacher, Kent

Head teachers are concerned to ensure that those involved teaching languages in their schools possess the specialist linguistic *and* pedagogical skills necessary to provide children with access to a quality language learning experience.

36 head teachers expressed a need for more continuing professional development opportunities to support the current workforce. Language upskilling for non-specialist teachers was one example of the type of training required and head teachers also called for languages to be integrated into initial teacher training programmes:

CPD on speaking languages and pedagogical support.

Head teacher, Sunderland

Training for staff to maintain confidence levels, ideas for cross-curricular links - such as provided by CILT.

Head teacher, Solihull

It would also be helpful if NQTs were coming out of training with some experience of language which I fear will not be the case if there is not a requirement at KS3 & 4 to study a foreign language. Where will the graduates be?

Head teacher, Hertfordshire

Primary schools need access to national, local and school-level networks to support developing sustainable models of languages provision.

27 head teachers called for support from national and local networks and school links. Examples included local authority support coordinated by LA advisers, links with neighbouring secondary schools, improved cross-phase communication and support from CILT:

An area advisor who has an overall view of the region, advise where to go for specific help or advice, and can coordinate training.

Head teacher, Kent

A network of leading teachers who can support the teachers in the classroom if needed.

Head teacher, Sefton

Access to suitable training, resources and support networks from the local authority or secondary schools.

Head teacher, Solihull

Organisations such as CILT for advice. We also have an excellent local authority adviser.

Head teacher, Norfolk

Primary languages need formal recognition and increased status to secure schools' ongoing provision for the subject.

13 head teachers reported that sustainable language teaching in their schools would be strengthened by policy measures giving the subject a more formal recognition. Specific measures included, prescribing the allocation of primary curriculum time to languages, granting languages statutory status in the primary curriculum, government-led promotion of

languages and language learning and making language learning compulsory throughout secondary education:

Languages should be made statutory so that they are given status in the curriculum.
Head teacher, London Borough of Merton

Make sure that the work done in primary schools does not become optional in the secondary phase so that key stage progression is achievable.

Head teacher, Solihull

As for transition... hopefully, as skills grow, languages will become compulsory again in secondary schools. It's a crucial curriculum for the future of our children!

Head teacher, Cheshire West and Chester

Committed leadership and backing at DfE and support for CILT.

Head teacher, City of Plymouth

The powerful expression of support for primary languages captured in head teachers' messages to government resonates in these appeals for further endorsement of the subject to ensure provision can continue in primary schools.



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